

## Diaspora as an ethnographic method: decolonial reflections on researching urban multiculturalism in outer East London

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# Diaspora as an ethnographic method: decolonial reflections on researching urban multiculturalism in outer East London<sup>i</sup>

## Abstract

This paper reflects on diaspora as an ethnographic method. Grounded in a decolonial critique of colonial methodologies (including an evaluation of transnational scholarship), it discusses how diaspora provides intellectual and practical tools for ethnography; tools grounded in the appreciation for the relational, dialogical and poetic qualities of social and cultural life and invested in decolonial approaches to knowledge and power. This paper is not another call for a one-size-fits-all approach to ethnographic methods, but instead reflects on the knots of ethnographic enquiry around three outer East London youth clubs, between 2008 and 2012. In so doing, it highlights a number of debates pertinent to this Special Issue: how to think and do ethnography with young people in a changing migratory and racialised landscape; how to engage transformations in youth culture; and how to address digital technologies.

## Key words

Diaspora, Ethnography, Youth, Culture, Race, Decolonial, Postcolonial, Transnationalism, Outer East London, Newham

## Introduction

April 2009, a year after the fieldwork began, I was still struggling with my main research question: “how do Eastern European young people make their lives in super-diverse East London?” Although latterly developing into a project on urban multiculturalism, the question invited a monologic statement about a predetermined and fetishized alien world, authorised through my position as an expert. It established a fixed site at which this phenomenon was to be viewed, and located it in a super-diverse present.

As part of an on-going attempt to think and do diaspora as an ethnographic method, this paper develops methodological reflections away from that framing. Here, diaspora provides a set of theoretical and practical tools with which to think and do ethnography; tools grounded in the appreciation for the relational, dialogical and poetic qualities of social and cultural life and invested in decolonial<sup>ii</sup> approaches to knowledge and power. As such, this paper is not another call for another one-size-fits-all approach to ethnographic methods, but instead reflects on the knots of ethnographic enquiry around three outer East London youth clubs, between 2008 and 2012. In so doing, it highlights a number of debates pertinent to this Special Issue: how to think and do ethnography with young people in a changing migratory and racialised landscape; how to engage with transformations in youth culture; and how to address digital technologies.

To address these concerns the paper is organised in two parts. The first part addresses how diaspora as an ethnographic method has been thought – foregrounding decolonial critiques of colonial ethnography. This part particularly engages with transnationalism, which has been under-scrutinised on these terms. Located in ethnographic research with young people

in outer East London, the second part reflects on how diaspora as an ethnographic method was done.

## Ethnography as a colonial method

Colonialism did not end in the post-colonial period (Gregory 2004; Mignolo 2015; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). Rather, along with its constitutive partner capitalism, it has continued to organise human life and therefore the methodologies by which ethnographers reproduce knowledge and power. The myths of biological and economic progress – infused into the scientific method by Darwinism and Malthusianism, continue to provide a dominant narrative for social and cultural life (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p.10). Over half a century ago Fanon warned against methodological statements for precisely this reason (Fanon 1986, p.14). Six decades later, Hall advocated the same dereliction of duty to preserve the poetics he read in the work of Avtar Brah (Brah 1999; Hall 2012).

Between these two moments, ethnography has been widely critiqued for upholding colonial knowledge and power. Anthropologists have drawn on the decolonial scholarship of Fanon, Cesaire and Said, and the anti-enlightenment analyses of Bakhtin and Nietzsche, to evaluate the colonial dispositions of ethnographic work (Asad 1986; Clifford 1988; de Certeau 1984; Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1993; Said 1978). Urban sociology's role in sustaining racial hierarchies has been scrutinised,<sup>iii</sup> Community Studies stereotyping of black British populations has been laid bare<sup>iv</sup> and the *New East End's* endorsement of white legitimacy contested (Dench et al. 2006).<sup>v</sup>

Rather than re-iterate these well-established critiques, this paper starts its troubling of colonial ethnography through an engagement with the less assuming field of transnationalism.

Arising at the intersection of anthropology and migration studies, 'transnationalism' refers to a body of work concerned with ethnic diversity and global cultural exchange (Glick Schiller 2003). Seemingly contesting assumptions around assimilation and nationalism in ethnographic research, through critical concepts such as 'methodological nationalism'<sup>vi</sup> (Wimmer and Schiller 2003, p.301) – it discusses how 'new migrants' continue to be active (in political, familial, economic, religious, political and cultural arenas) in their homelands and in the countries that receive them (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Wimmer and Schiller 2003). These discussions often draw on decolonial language – multi-sitedness (Boccagni 2014), hybridity (referred to as 'social morphology') and double consciousness (referred to as 'bi-focality') – to make their claims (Vertovec 1999, 2004). As has been noted by Marcus in relation to the misrepresentation of his own work (on multi-sited ethnography), this language is often used in spite of its colonial underpinnings; that is to say in spite of its propagation of racial and pseudo-racial categories for population analysis and management (Marcus 1999).

To understand this colonial subscript we can consider the historical development of the field. Interfacing closely with migration studies, transnationalism has developed alongside political science models for migration: neo-classicism and rational choice. These models have sought to establish the causal factors of migration and have made use of racial or pseudo-racial categories for populations (nation, ethnicity and culture) (Arango 2004; Castles and Miller 2003; Massey et al. 1993).<sup>vii</sup> They latterly developed into network models attending to multi-polar world movements (Massey et al. 1993, p.454). As Vertovec notes, "most social scientists working in [this] field may agree that 'transnationalism' broadly refers

to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec 1999, p. 447). So, although transnationalism uses decolonial language and claims to undermine assumptions about race and nation, it also privileges these categories as units of analysis thereby compounding colonial and racial interpretations of humanity (Glick Schiller 2005, p.442).<sup>viii</sup>

This has been made possible by inattention to racism and colonialism in the same works.<sup>ix</sup> By concentrating ethnographic focus on the cultural exchanges of ethnic groups across national borders, ethnicity and culture tend to appear as the modes through which transnational populations live, and nations as the de facto borders of these relations, without attending to the ways in which racism and colonialism create and enact these categories for human life. In this way, the history and power of racism and colonialism are ignored in favour of a flat culturist reading of human movement and migration (Back 2015).

As has been noted the historical development of colonialism and capitalism are intertwined. So from a decolonial perspective, transnationalism must also be evaluated in relation to capitalist knowledge. Evaluating transnationalism on these terms reveals additional complicities. Capitalist and colonial time obsesses with novelty and disregards deeper notions of temporality. This version of time, usefully approximated in Bakhtin's concept of 'small time' – a tyranny of the now (Bakhtin 1986) – has developed in the interests of a present in which the white, bourgeois and male subject is made master. It is from this standpoint that a destructive and self-interested future is plotted alongside a homogenized and often nostalgic past.<sup>x</sup>

In the field of transnationalism, this version of small time defines key debates. It appears in arguments on the linear integration of migrants in 'host' nations, with scholars arguing that practices and attachments relating to the homeland are ubiquitous among first generation migrants but become sparse among young people in subsequent generation (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, p.133). Focusing on the 'facts' of transnationalism – language fluency and intention of returning 'home' as proof of this thesis – these analyses deny a more complex, plural and ambiguous interplay of historical, embodied and psychic experiences in which migrants and non-migrants participate (Wilding 2007). These arguments further presuppose that second-generation young people become detached from their cultural histories leading to assumptions of uprootedness, in-betweenness, and liminality – the basis of demands for assimilation (Alexander 1996; Solomos 1988).

Similarly, transnationalism over-invests in the 'new'. Also critiqued from within the field (Portes and Zhou 1999; Vertovec 2006), founding scholarship in this area was preoccupied with whether transnational migration was actually new (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). Again, this belied a colonial and capitalist investment in novelty and progress, that occluded longer histories of migration and movement and clouded the fact that migrations and migrants are only ever transnational because territories and people have been bounded (Zolberg 1999 cited in Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

Returning to young people in outer East London, these colonial and capitalist framings for urban multiculturalism have culminated in Vertovec's much cited observation on the "emergence of super-diversity" in that location (Vertovec 2006). He comments that outer East London has surpassed all previous markers for cross-ethnic co-habitation and presents this as a challenge for the management of multi-ethnic Britain. This is more specifically a challenge for the management of ethnically diverse young people, as this is where super-diversity is most strongly registered in Newham (LBN 2010; LBN 2006, p.4; ONS 2001). While

this observation, is useful for marking the on-going racial reconfiguration of youth in Britain, it is also indicative of transnationalism's complicity with colonial thinking. It adheres to racial categorisation, and ethnic diversity as novelty and progress, invites the management of populations on these terms, and underplays the role of racism in the construction and maintenance of these ideas.

## Thinking diaspora as an ethnographic method

Decolonial approaches to ethnography have worked to illuminate and deconstruct colonial dominance. Whereas colonial methodologies are concerned with the categorisation and ordering of human life, in relation to race and nation, and with ideas of time preoccupied with capitalist progress, decolonial methodologies have been concerned with poetic and dialogic forms of being and knowledge. Poetics in this work is used to denote the motifs, relations, spaces, ambiguities, partialities, errancies, ruptures and allegories of everyday life, and it is interested in questioning how colonial ethnographies enact a ruse of power to overcome and control these (Asad 1986; Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1986, 1988; Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1993).

Decolonial ethnography is then grounded in an appreciation for the poetics of human relations and its struggle against colonial authority.<sup>xi</sup> As Martiniquais poet and writer Édouard Glissant explains:

[Poetic] Relation diversifies forms of humanity according to infinite strings of models infinitely brought into contact and relayed. This point of departure does not even allow us to outline a typology of these contacts or of the interactions thus triggered. Its sole merit would lie in proposing that Relation has its source in these contacts and not in itself; that its aim is not Being, a self-important entity that would locate its beginning in itself.

Relation is a product that in turn produces. What it produces does not partake of Being. That is why, without too much anthropomorphic reductiveness perhaps, we can risk individuating it here as a system, so as to speak about it by name (1997, p.160).

Glissant outlines the relationship between poetics and humanity with which decolonial ethnography is concerned. These poetics draw attention to the irreducibility of human relations – attending to its interactive, creative, plural and un-categorisable qualities.

Decolonial ethnographers have not only been concerned with the poetics of human relations but also with how these poetics necessitate the “repeated performance of colonial authority to create and mark out difference (and erase hybridity) while simultaneously attesting to its incompleteness and impossibility” (Alexander 2010, p.493). That is to say, they have been interested in how the imposition of colonial authority on poetics draws attention to the creativity of human relations through its attempted management. Indeed, decolonial ethnographers of urban youth cultures have paid specific attention to how these contradictions manifest themselves in the city. This work addresses the ‘metropolitan paradox’: the existence of poetics alongside colonial violence (Back 1994), for example, the proximity of the cultural dynamics of the sound system to the practices of racial terror (Banerjea and Barn 1996, p.198).

Within decolonial ethnography diaspora is a key concept. This approach to diaspora is different from that which describes the characteristics of ethnic or national groups forcibly displaced from their homelands (Safran 1991). Although rooted in the idea of scattering (from the Greek *diaspeirō*), the decolonial approach to diaspora has been less interested in categorising the attributes of diaspora populations that it has been in attending to the displacement of people and culture (music, texts, language, etc.), often in relation to youth cultures, in order to complicate claims to racial and cultural authenticity (Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; Hall 1992). This is achieved by drawing attention to the ways in which the diaspora process transforms and displaces race and nation to the extent that claims to be native or migrant become untenable as the native becomes the diasporian and the diasporian the native (Brah 1996, p.209). Underpinning this work is a radical investment in estrangement from race and nation (Gilroy 2010; Glissant 1997).

Again, these “double-sided, complex, combined and uneven, unsettled and displaced character[istics]” of social life (Hall 2012, p.31) have not been theorised aside from attention to colonial and capitalist violence. At the same time as these approaches are attuned to the poetics of human relations ethnographic studies of youth cultures have also attended to the ways in which capitalism (in its modern, late modern and neo-liberal forms) has worked alongside colonialism in the practicing of violence (Ali 2003; Back 1994; Harris 2006; Hewitt 1986; Jones 1988; Nayak 2003). This should remind us that these approaches do not advocate flattened diversity or a melting pot ideology. On the contrary, they have, and continue to be, opposed to this reading of human relations. In youth research today, they continue to argue for the deconstruction of racialised knowledge, being and practice by marking and contesting its instantiation (Bramwell 2015; James 2015; Kim 2015; Kulz 2014 see also Valluvan in this volume).

Decolonial approaches to youth have further focused on the ethnographic production of colonial authority. Here Spivak’s famous inquiry on the power of voice in the colonial encounter – *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988) – is reworked and attention paid to the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is co-produced in a field of cross-cutting racialised, classed and gendered power relations (Alexander 1996, 2000; Ali 2006). In relation to writing, these insights problematise the role played by the (often invisible) colonial ethnographer in authorising accounts of alien worlds from a position of privilege. They also call for the on-going re-evaluation of research practices. Sinha and Back have recently renewed the demand for co-production in ethnographic processes, arguing for “research that shifts the ordering of researcher dialogue, where participants are involved in deciding what/how methods are to be used to address research objectives” (2013, p.478).

Diasporic approaches have focused on the cultural and textual dimensions of ethnographic enquiry. These interpretations of diaspora have questioned the complicity of phenomenology in colonial, capitalist and liberal modes of thought (Sharma et al. 1996). Building on the discussion above, they draw attention to the ways in which phenomenology and hermeneutics (as the studies of experience and interpretation) are intertwined with the development of colonial and capitalist knowledge in Europe, and in particular with the privileging of white, bourgeois and male subjectivities. Relatedly, they consider how the multiple registers of everyday life are not wholly captured in phenomenological approaches (Back and Puwar 2012). Echoing Du Bois’ seminal contributions to this field, these works demonstrate how sound and music provide alternative registers for everyday life; an approach exemplified in Lewis’ recent exploration (through music, social structure, feeling and psychology) of her relationship with her father (Du Bois 2007; Lewis 2012).

Finally, these works engage with technology, acknowledging its interconnectedness with social and cultural relations. In Du Bois (the voice) and in Lewis (records) have this function. In the study of urban multiculturalism, the sound system has addressed this confluence. Scholars have discussed the arrival of sound systems, sound system personnel and reggae music to the UK from Jamaica in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, noting how these different registers intertwined to foment anti-capitalist politics and decolonial struggles (Back 1994; Gilroy 2002 [1987], p.267). Recently, the “newly coordinated social realities” of digital technologies in urban youth cultures have been examined in this vein (Back 2012, p.20; James 2015).

Whereas, colonial ethnographies have thought about human relationality through racial categories and capitalist projections of time, decolonial ethnographies, and in particular those concerned with young people, have engaged with diaspora as a means of deconstructing colonial dominance and drawing attention to the poetic, subversive but also complicit assemblages of social, cultural and technological relations.

## Doing diaspora as an ethnographic method

Sometime during the beginning of my PhD programme, I was advised by my supervisor, Claire Alexander to “embrace the messiness” of ethnography. This seemingly unequivocal advice was far from straight forward. Grounded in an appreciation for the poetic and diasporic qualities of everyday life, I was being asked to practice a kind of ethnography that could respond to these human relations. My initial research question (presented at the beginning of this paper) was far from that reading. Conditioned by dominant colonial (racial compartmentalising) and capitalist (liberal, bourgeois, phenomenological) paradigms, it imagined human relations in terms of categories and procedures. A racialised population was frozen in time and space for methods to be applied along a timeline of academic production.

Alexander’s advice encouraged a move away from this dehumanising neatness towards an engagement with the social, cultural and technological dimensions of my research. This section draws on two year’s fieldwork with young people in outer East London to reflect on how ethnographic practice in this location became informed by the principles of diaspora. More specifically, through a series of ethnographic vignettes, it addresses how this ethnography engaged with untidiness, failure and error; colonial authority; co-production; and, social and cultural errantry.

Embracing messiness and failure was an important first step in moving away from the certainty of the scientific method, and for opening the ethnography to the untidiness and errors of everyday life. Up until this point, the research more closely resembled the model encouraged by methods manuals and the university’s PhD assessment processes. That is to say, prematurely developed and propped up by methods text books, it stipulated gatekeepers, stakeholders, participants, methods and timeframes to project the requisite research output, and its own validity.

Embracing messiness entailed moving away from this approach and becoming comfortable with the uncertainties and failures that characterise ethnographic research and everyday life. To this end, I dispensed with the initial research question. I introduced reflexivity into research practices and became open failure and error as routine. This further entailed dispensing with the research timeline and involving young people in decision-making processes. This reflected increased attention to diaspora as an ethnographic method but it was also a practical necessity. Everyday life does not conform to preordained progression.

So in place of certainty, trial, error and failure guided the research. These encouraged the unforeseen conversations, activities, and initiatives that became the bedrock of the ethnography, at the same time as they allowed for the music studio that got no use, the football club where all the players were better than me, the youth club that had no members and the consistent overtaking of many research initiatives by everyday events.

Embracing messiness was important in other ways. Errors became open to errantry, and in particular the errant histories of Newham. This opening should perhaps not be surprising. Glissant's formulation of errantry closely relates to his understanding of human poetics as error – an idea central to diaspora theory and iterated elsewhere as 'difference' (Bhabha 1994; Derrida 1976; Spivak 1976). Engaging errantry in this way complicated the initial research question's over-determined present. Rather than approaching the lives of young people as novel – as 'small time' – it encouraged an engagement with 'great time' revealing how outer East London was made through migration and movement (Bakhtin 1986).

Prior to 1840, much of the south and west of Newham was unpopulated marshland (Powell 1973). From this point onwards industry, cheap housing, railways and the docks brought people to Newham from all over the UK and the world. The continuation of these movements and mobilities meant that by 2001 Newham had the largest proportion of non-white ethnic groups in the country (61 per cent) (ONS 2001) and by 2011 it was the most ethnically diverse London Borough (GLA 2011). Through great time and errantry, Newham was then composed through multiple mobilities laid down, traced and renewed over generations (James 2014; Visram 1986; Visram 2010; Wemyss 2009).

This diasporic approach to Newham's great time provided the necessary basis for a critical engagement with racism in that location. It was the basis of understanding how contemporary racisms – often expressed through claims to the earth (autochthony) (Geschiere 2009) – traced over, and were intertwined with, cultural and skin colour racisms. As I have discussed elsewhere, participant observation and interviews with young people at Leyham Youth Club<sup>xii</sup> (one of the three youth clubs I worked at) highlighted these formations (James 2014). Through listening to young people's discussions of Eastern Europeans and the black migrant and refugee populations of neighbouring area Millfield, the racial construction of Leyham neighbourhood, and the nation, as territories in need of defence became apparent.

Kylie and Molly were two working-class young women who lived close to Leyham Youth Club. Kylie had a British Romany and English family background and Molly was English and Greek. Both agreed that defence was necessary because Leyham and Britain were suffering from loss – an analysis captured in Gilroy's discussion of post-colonial melancholia (Gilroy 2004). For Kylie, Molly and many other young people, loss was embodied in those deemed not to belong, and defence in those who did. Those who did belong, as Molly told me, had to have been "born in this country". "Born in this country" then became a category through which racism could be enacted by an ethnically diverse population towards ethnically diverse 'others'. It was an articulation of violence through which these young people ironically and destructively participated in the racist hierarchies that were predicated on their own marginalisation as black, Asian and not-white-enough young people. Through participant observation and interviews, diaspora as an ethnographic method thereby facilitated comprehension of how the diasporian was the native and the native the diasporian (Brah 1996), and of how these positionalities were cross cut by racist violence.<sup>xiii</sup>



Diaspora focused attention on the co-production of knowledge in this context, and in particular how my whiteness made sense of racist dynamics at the youth clubs. I recorded in the fieldnotes how I was uncomfortable with banter I perceived to be, but sometimes wasn't, racist and how I was part of its production. I wrote how Sarah (a youth worker) and Kylie (a young person) traded insults. Kylie said "your mum sold her teeth for crack". Sarah retorted "your mum sold her whole house to a Lithuanian for crack". Both the 'whole house' and the figure of the Lithuanian were used to make the joke more profane. This racist utterance revealed the ways in which the women composed exclusions that also related to the violence they endured. Kylie's Romany background was often the focus of similar banter. As the banter ended, I laughed. An audience to the joke, my whiteness had made the joke possible, but my laughter also revealed my privilege. Mine was not an ironic and destructive struggle for mobility in a racist neoliberal society but the performance of hegemony in a society in which my privilege was assumed.

Diaspora further complicated the racial categorisation conveyed in the initial research question. Most young people I worked with had been born in East London, many were mixed race and nearly all had histories of migration that took them, via their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, outside East London to the English regions, to Irish Gipsy and British Romany populations, to Ireland and Scotland, to Greece, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Kenya, Albania, Romania, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, France, Spain, Portugal, Jamaica, Barbados, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the list went on. However, the narratives and practices associated with these movements complicated these neat compartmentalisations. From international migrations, and holidays in homelands, young people knew the streets of Kampala and Paris, the Hills of northern Albania and the drive through Germany to get there. Some young people passed through Newham from Romania and went 'home' again. Other young people left for Dubai and Saudi Arabia, or to Kenya following their family's labour migrations, but came back 'home' to Newham.

More than simply affirm the presence of transnational populations, these movements produced convoluted stories, in tension with the forms of racial violence discussed above. At the same time that young people practiced ethnic identification, and participated in myths of homeland, their errantry also generated estrangement and solidarity that complicated the certainty of these same categories. At the After School Club (another of the youth clubs I worked at), its ethnically diverse and fluid population meant that racial assignments were often confused or unknown. At the same time young people were curious of ethnic and national provenance, hierarchies were open to play and malleability.

One example came from a dialogue between a youth worker, Mel, and two young men with the same Congolese surname. Standing around the pool table, Mel, whose own parents were Indian and English, asked if her interlocutors were brothers on account of their shared surname. Mel's question was uttered in a context of common dislocation, and rooted in a curiosity over their relationship, their surname, and therefore provenance. Kane, one of the young men, replied 'no', they weren't and if they looked alike it was because they were from the same tribe. He said that there were only two tribes in the Congo.

His response took advantages of the ambiguities of national pasts in the youth club, whilst at the same time using this context to convivially draw Mel into the joke. Kane had reasoned correctly that Mel was unfamiliar with the ethnic composition of the Congo. After waiting enough time for her confusion to publicly register, laughter was shared and Mel was given to realise that they were brothers. The joke ended and attention returned to the pool game.

This run-of-the-mill encounter is indicative of what Valluvan describes this volume as an “indifference to difference” – the possibility for social interactions where racial difference is acknowledged but it is not the basis of social violence. It drew attention to the ways in which diaspora complicated transnational assumptions based on national and ethnic categories.

With regards to the cultural dimensions of diaspora, between spring 2009 and the beginning of 2010 Leyham Youth Club moved to the rhythm of two music and dance performances. The first of these was *Leyham Dances*. Inspired by the hugely popular *Britain's Got Talent*, it was a collective effort at ‘streetdance’ – a hybrid of break dancing and athletic, group dance routines popularised through the all-male dance groups Diversity and Flawless. Imitating the Saturday night TV format, young men and women organised practice sessions and choreographed routines. The second, *Misdemeanours*, was a set of YouTube dance videos made for the attention of a local producer. Performed by three young men, and recorded on and soundtracked by mobile phones, these performances brought Missy Elliot into dialogue with grime, and streetdance into contact with breaking.

While these performances were embodied and experiential, they could not be understood by phenomenology alone. To do so would be to ignore the ways that music and dance traced diasporic histories and fed back into everyday life.

With regards to *Leyham Dances*, the predictably stop-start-and-renegotiate process of video making provided moments of dialogue that opened up enquires on the place of music and bodies in public performance, and their relationship to diasporic constellations of music and kinaesthetics. This drew attention to the ways in which texts of global-commercial hip hop and Jamaican dancehall were cited to provide a sound and dance track through which young people performed their neoliberal aspirations (in the *Britain's Got Talent* mould) in a society predicated on their marginalisation.

With regards to *Misdemeanours*, the performance of Missy Elliot's *Lose Control* by three young white men was evidence of the citation of commercial black diasporic texts for the purposes of constructing patriarchy, whiteness and class loss. The trio made the YouTube dance videos to impress local producer K-Line whose own impromptu raps in the youth club were concerned with chiding a mixed race young women for being black and white, with his own white racial authenticity, and relatedly with his violent defence of the local neighbourhood. *Misdemeanours* then showed how in the context of Newham's migratory history, Elliot's relatively safe commercialised version of black feminist emancipation could be performed – without the accusation of racial ‘faking it’ – for a figure concerned with the violent defence of racial authenticity in the local area.

These cultural performances could not be understood aside from their relationship to technology. From 2008 YouTube use rocketed around the youth clubs I worked at, both in terms of young people watching music videos and creating and uploading videos to the platform. This corresponded with the movement of grime personnel, who had their roots in sound systems, garage and UK hip hop to the YouTube platform (Bradley 2013, p.368-387) – a movement facilitated by the spread of public and home Internet connections; the availability and affordability of mobile phones with cameras, speakers and Bluetooth; and, the acquisition of YouTube by Google.

Whereas sound systems existed because of the marginalisation of black working-class people from the bourgeois white public sphere, the YouTube music videos discussed above existed because young people in outer East London were marginalised in terms of race and

class from public debate and dialogue (Hancox 2009; Lowkey 2012). Many of the young people I worked with were too young to go to clubs and did not have the money to buy CDs and MP3s, or dedicated sound and video recording equipment. Just as sound systems used affordable technologies, digital and mobile technology provided them with an accessible means to play, record and share music.

However, at the same time these processes asked questions of the changing politics of marginalised young people. The sound system is noted to have generated demands against, and beyond, capitalism and racism through in-time, bass-mediated collectivity (Back 1994; Gilroy 1987; Henriques 2011). The tinny speakers, poor quality sound and the hyper mobile privatisation<sup>xiv</sup> of social media platforms seemed to be consistent with the erosion of alternative youth politics and its conscription to neoliberal order.

However, the transformation was somewhat less clear. As noted, YouTube music videos provided affordable means to play, record and share music in an otherwise exclusionary public sphere. As also noted, these forms of interaction were stripped of their former collective and affective politics. Nonetheless, just as the technologies of mechanical reproduction (the record player, the record, the amplifier and the speaker) were rewired for the sound system, so too were the circuitries of YouTube navigated (although recoded) to the end of generating languages and aesthetics of struggle that drew on and fed back into the diasporic nexus.

In 2012, a group of young people associated with Leyham Youth Club called *Upcoming Movement*, produced two music videos that reflected on the foreclosure of their futures and their daily struggles in neoliberal Britain. To do so they drew on an array of Albanian, US and UK hip hop tracks concerned with the struggles of everyday life and made available through YouTube. Whilst this did not neutralise the privatisation inherent in the YouTube platform or place them in the bass mediated collectivity of the dance hall, it did show how through a collective process of reflection, they used available diasporic lexicons from YouTube to communicate their struggle to diasporic others making similar transmissions.

## Reflection

This paper has reflected on diaspora as an ethnographic method. Grounded in a decolonial critique of colonial methodologies, it has discussed the ways in which diaspora provides intellectual and practical tools to explore the poetics of social, cultural and technological relations, the ways in which capitalism and colonialism seeks to control these, and, the place of authority and co-production in the research process. As part of this discussion, it has sought to trouble assumptions that underpin the field of transnationalism. This has been done to draw attention to the political and intellectual basis through which decolonial research has developed, and to caution against ethnographies that use decolonial terms in name but not in practice.

The discussion held in this paper has not been offered in the service of a one-size-fits all approach to ethnography, but as part of an on-going evaluation of decolonial ethnography in a particular time and place. As such, this paper does not signal the end of this enquiry, and certainly does not present a resolution. The solo-authorship of the research, and its institutional location in the neoliberal academy present serious limitations to any overall claim to decolonial and collaborative knowledge production, as does the absence of a more sustained decolonial enquiry with its co-producers. To this extent it functions as no more

than a reflection on a diasporic approach to ethnography, and hopefully as a call to maintain, deepen and extend these forms of thinking and practice.

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<sup>i</sup> I would like to thank Katherine McKittrick suggested the idea of 'diaspora as a (literary and pedagogic) method' in a question and answer session at AAG 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Decolonial' is preferred to 'postcolonial' because the focus of the paper is how colonialism is thought, practiced and articulated in contemporary and past ethnography. In this paper, 'post-colonial' is used only to refer to the moment after empire.

<sup>iii</sup> See Bonnett 2000; Humphries 1981; Nayak 2003; Williams 1973 for criticism of Booth 1890, Mayhew 1861, Sims 1883.

<sup>iv</sup> See Alexander 1996.

<sup>v</sup> See Keith 2008; Moore 2008 for critical engagements with Dench.

<sup>vi</sup> The intertwining of "nationalist thinking and the conceptualization of migration in postwar social sciences" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, p.301).

<sup>vii</sup> While world system's theory was somewhat different in that it drew on the work of Wallerstein to explain global migrations in terms of capitalist exploitation of the global South, it still assigned the complexity of global humanity to regions placed on a colonial/capitalist timeline between development and under-development (Arango 2004, p.27; Castles and Miller 2003, p.26; Kivisto 2001, p.555).

<sup>viii</sup> This is referred to as "transnational methodological nationalism" (Glick Schiller 2005, p.442).

<sup>ix</sup> Inattention that is not rectified in Glick Schiller's otherwise useful consideration of transnationalism and neo-imperialism (Glick Schiller 2005).

<sup>x</sup> The colonial and racial dimensions of this ideology of time can be engaged through a critical reading of Kant's and Hegel's racial teleologies (Buck-Morss 2000; Kant 1997). Its capitalist dimensions are revealed in Benjamin, Nietzsche and Bakhtin's examinations of bourgeois time (Bakhtin 1986; Benjamin 1978; Nietzsche 1983)

<sup>xi</sup> Bakhtin's notion of the double-voice in dialogue often provides a sympathetic conceptual tool for addressing the instability of meaning in colonial discourse and practice (Alexander 2010; Bhabha 1994).

<sup>xii</sup> All personal, youth club and neighbourhood names have been changed.

<sup>xiii</sup> I discuss elsewhere how these territorial formations were also gendered and classed (James 2015).

<sup>xiv</sup> For Williams, 'mobile privatisation' encapsulates the ways in which television, in industrial capitalist Britain, connected different places and times (mobility) through individualised forms of consumption (privatisation) (Williams 1974, p.26).